

GOOD OLD GRANDDAD BEKNUR

I was riding into the mountain valley. My horse trudged up the steep pass. The winding path climbed higher and higher. The smooth stones shone like silver in the sun-light and that's probably why our forefathers called it Silver Pass. When you got to the top your heart started throbbing loudly and when you looked down into the abyss, your head began spinning and your eyes became misted. It was so high!

Suddenly I heard a rustling sound and looked up. A huge eagle was hovering overhead.

I was as happy to see him as a good old friend. The eagle must have been getting on in years now. He was as old as these mountains. I remembered him as a little lad. His neck was scrawny then, too, and he circled just as slowly over the summer pasture. The children would point at him and shout:

"Hey old crow!"

"Tatty crow!"

Eagles aren't afraid of the cold winter and they don't migrate to warm countries. This eagle got frost-bitten more than once on the icy crags. One day he was almost caught by hunters. But he took a liking to the isolated rocks of Silver Pass, and as the years went by he became more and more attached to them, and now he never left them. He watched over his mountains. Everyone, both old folk and little children alike, in the vicinity knew him. And perhaps, he, too, knew all the folk who lived in the mountains and foothills.

The eagle escorted me down to the valley and then waved good-bye with his wings and soared upwards.

The valley opened out below. I could see a shepherd's grey yurta* standing all alone in the boundless steppe. From a distance it looked like a fairytale giant's lambskin hat.

The yurta seemed to be calling and beckoning to me: "Hey, traveller, come this way!" I urged my horse on.

As I rode along I marvelled how strange its owner was. The other shepherds had long ago fled from the mosquitoes and horseflies towards the foothills where there was plenty of grass and it wasn't so hot in the shade. But here the steppe was barren like a desert and the ground all around had been trampled by sheep's hooves. There wasn't a bush or a stunted blade of grass to be seen. Whenever there was a gentle breeze, the air was filled with dust. And the sun beat down mercilessly.

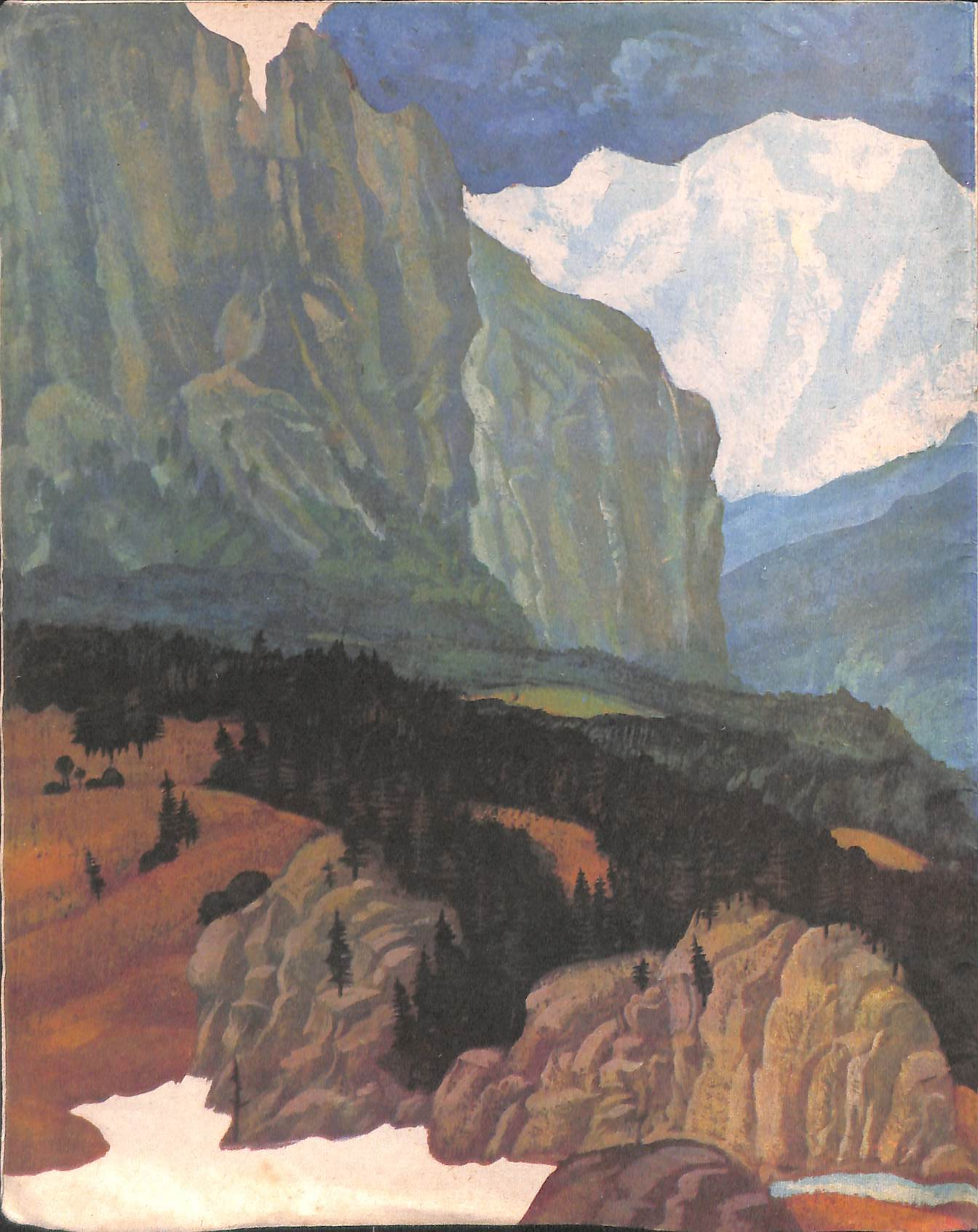
I rode up to the yurta. There wasn't a soul in sight. I was only greeted by two cheerfully twittering swallows. A cauldron was standing on a tripod and the fire had gone out under it. By the well there was a long wooden trough. I couldn't see any dogs either. They must have gone off with the flock. The dust was whirling in the far distance by the hill where the flock was grazing. Yes, of course, the owner of this solitary yurta must be tending his flock.

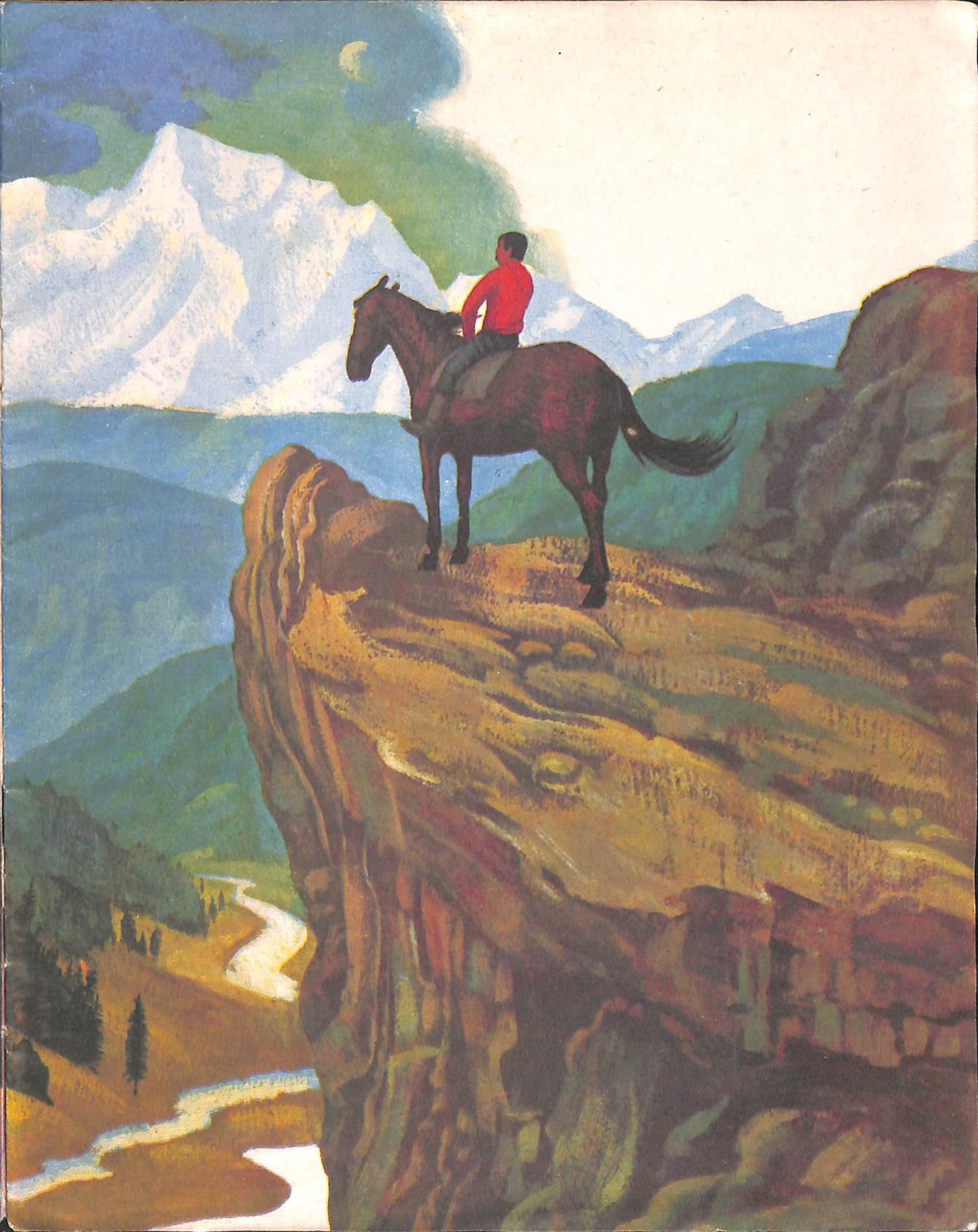
I slid off my horse, tied the reins to the saddle and went into the yurta. It was dark inside. The only light was filtering through a half-open wooden ring in the ceiling. I lifted the flap over the door and tied it to the lintel. The yurta at once became lighter.

Just like any other ordinary yurta, it was simply and modestly furnished. Two old iron chests covered with brightly-coloured quilts

* Movable tent made of animal hides.







were standing in a prominent place. In the centre there was a small low round table. The floor was covered with a mat. A horse's harness was hanging on the wall by the door. The swallows had built a nest between the rafters. They were flying to and fro, twittering incessantly. They evidently did as they pleased here!

I felt like having a rest after my ride and it was good for my horse to rest, too. The village was still a long way off. I would ride on in the evening when it was cooler.

It was pleasantly quiet and cool in the yurta. It was noon and the inquisitive sun was peeping through the hole in the ceiling. Fledglings were chirping in the swallows' nest.

I heard a noise in the distance which gradually grew louder. The sheep were bleating as they hurried to the well. Then I heard the shepherd's resonant shout, dogs barking and approaching footsteps.

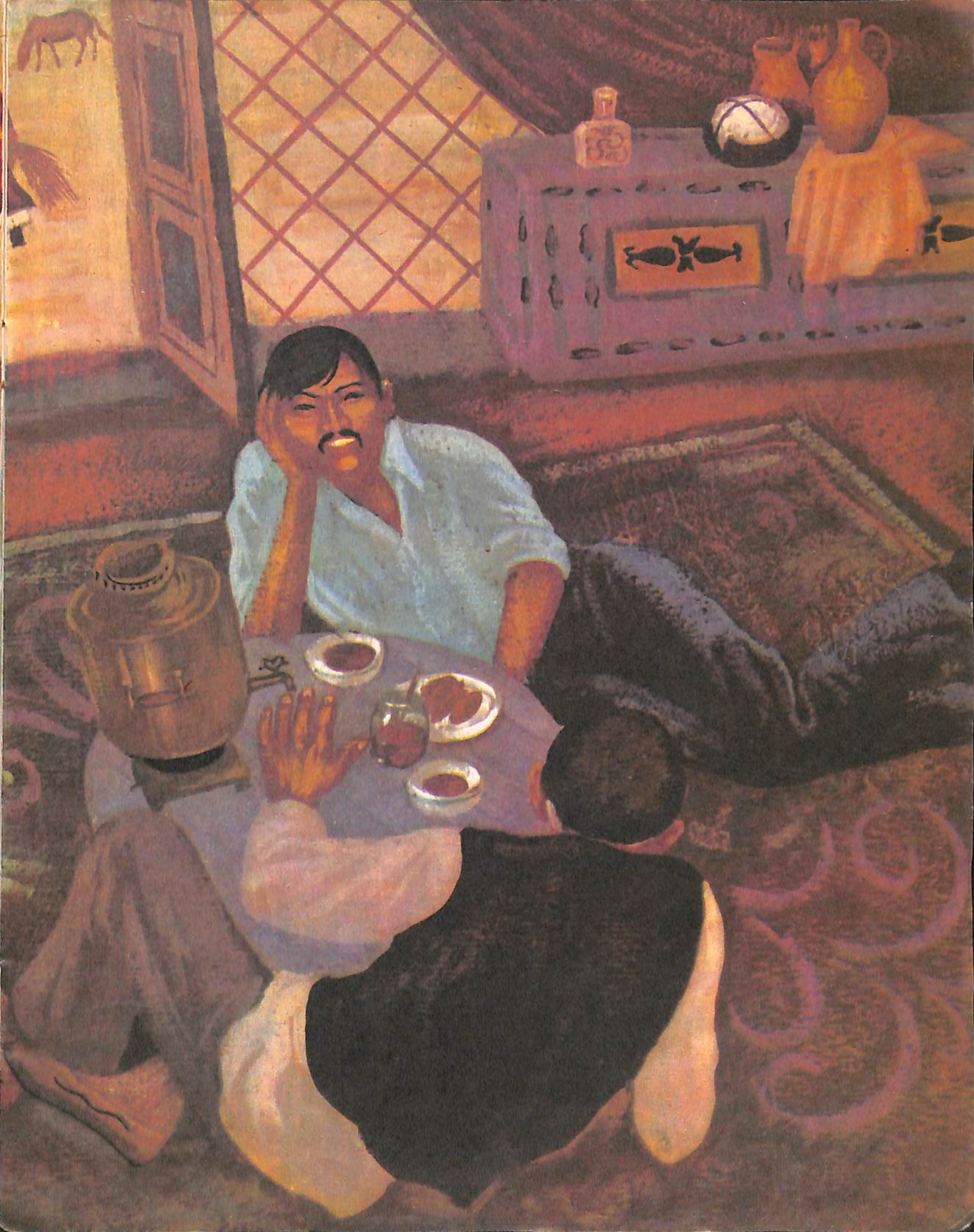
"Good day!"

I quickly jumped up and stretched out both my hands.

"Aleikum salem!" the yurta's owner replied reservedly.

Why, it's Granddad Beknur! He had aged and become more stooping. The years had bent his straight shoulders. He now had a long beard and white temples. His eyes were sunken and his face was deeply lined with wrinkles.





I introduced myself and Granddad at once became more animated. He took off his felt hat and pushed back the round skull-cap under it. In the same leisurely way he unlaced his dusty heavy boots and put them by the doorway. Only then did he sit down on the mat beside me, and stroking his beard, began asking me about my health and my affairs.

"Well, I never!" he shook his head in surprise. "Not so long ago you were still a little lad and now you're a regular fine horseman."

"And you've changed, too, Granddad," I said.

Oh, Granddad Beknur used to race like the wind across this steppe! The ground shook under the hooves of his fiery horses. He was a reckless rider: nobody could beat him. And now he had become a quiet old man who said little but thought a lot.

An old woman appeared. She had evidently been gathering brushwood since the morning. In the doorway she brushed her clothes and wiped her perspiring face. She didn't recognise me at once either.

"It's Dalabai," Granddad informed her.

The old woman smiled affectionately and inquired after my family and friends. Then she went off to warm the samovar.

Granddad Beknur gazed at his calloused palms in silence and listened attentively to me. He hadn't got any children or grandchildren: his only son was killed in the war.

He wiped his broad chest, which was still strong, with a towel and put some green chewing-tobacco into his mouth.

The wind started howling outside the yurta and a playful whirlwind chased a cloud of dust.

"Why have you stayed behind by yourselves in the bare parched steppe? All the other shepherds, you know, moved a long time ago?" I asked.

Granddad Beknur didn't reply straight away. Playing with his beard by wont of habit, he got up, walked towards the door, spit out the tobacco, swilled some water from the tea-pot and rinsed his mouth.

"And you have to drive the flock such a long way to the pasture," I continued. "Just think how many extra worries you've given yourself."

"But what can I do?" Granddad glanced sullenly at the hole in the ceiling. "You see, where these chatterboxes have made themselves at home and given birth to offspring? I think the little ones will fly away

when the new moon rises. I couldn't move my home and destroy the swallows' nest, could I? So now I'm stuck here."

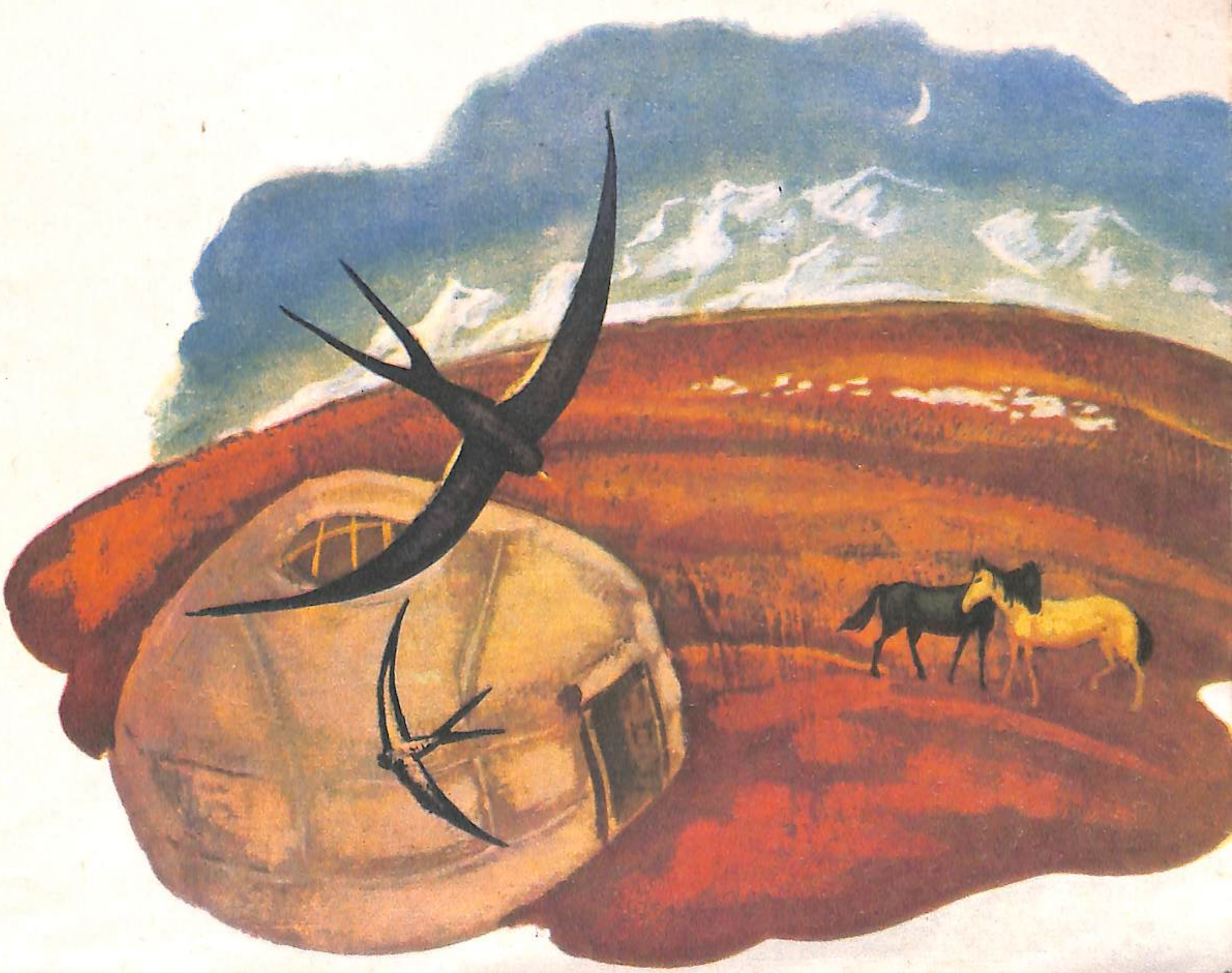
The old man smiled gently. I knew he only sounded gruff but that in actual fact he was pleased to see the swallows and their tiny fledglings. I was amazed how tender and kind the gloomy-looking shepherd was!

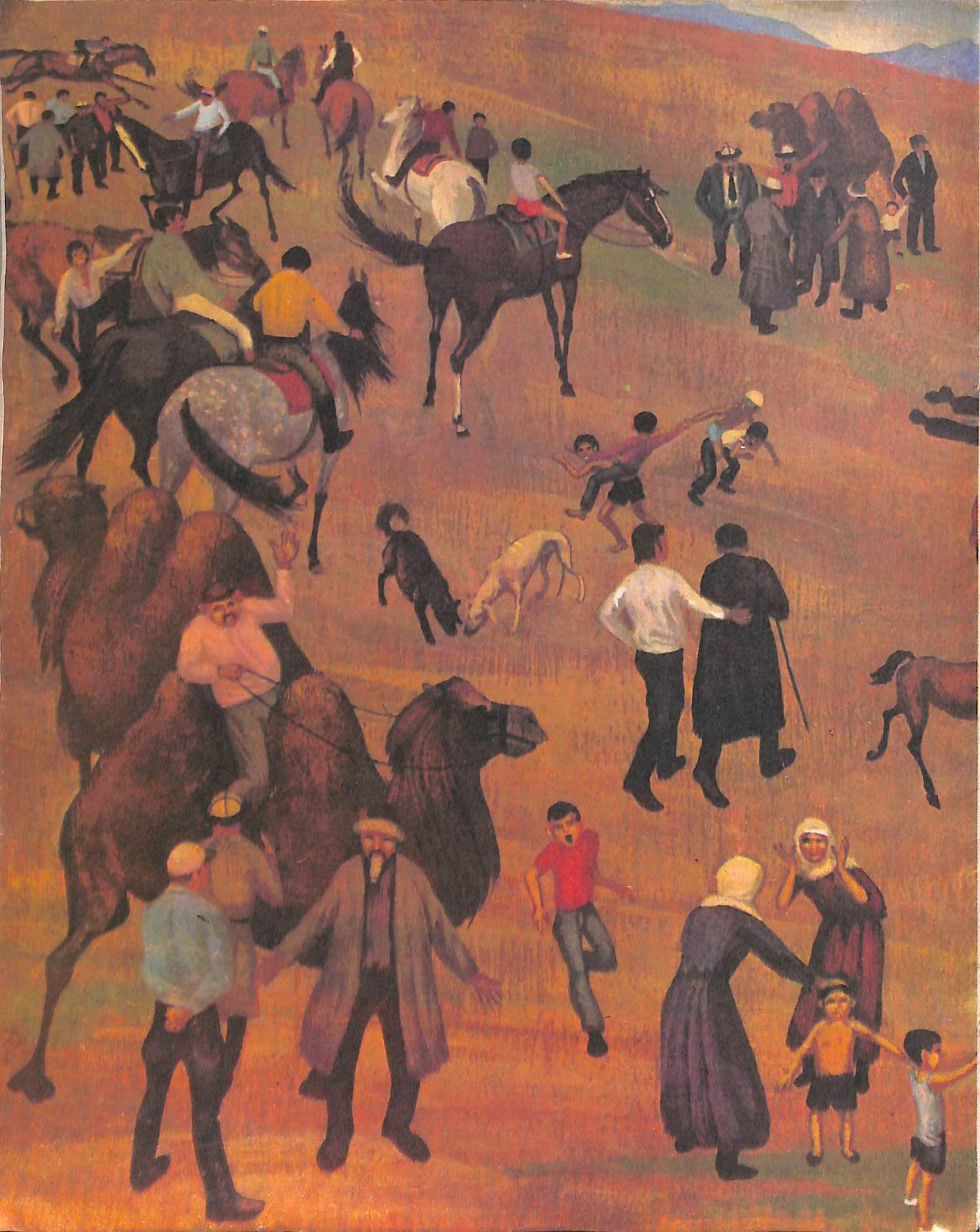
The old woman brought in the smoking and bubbling samovar and we drank the strong tea with fresh cream.

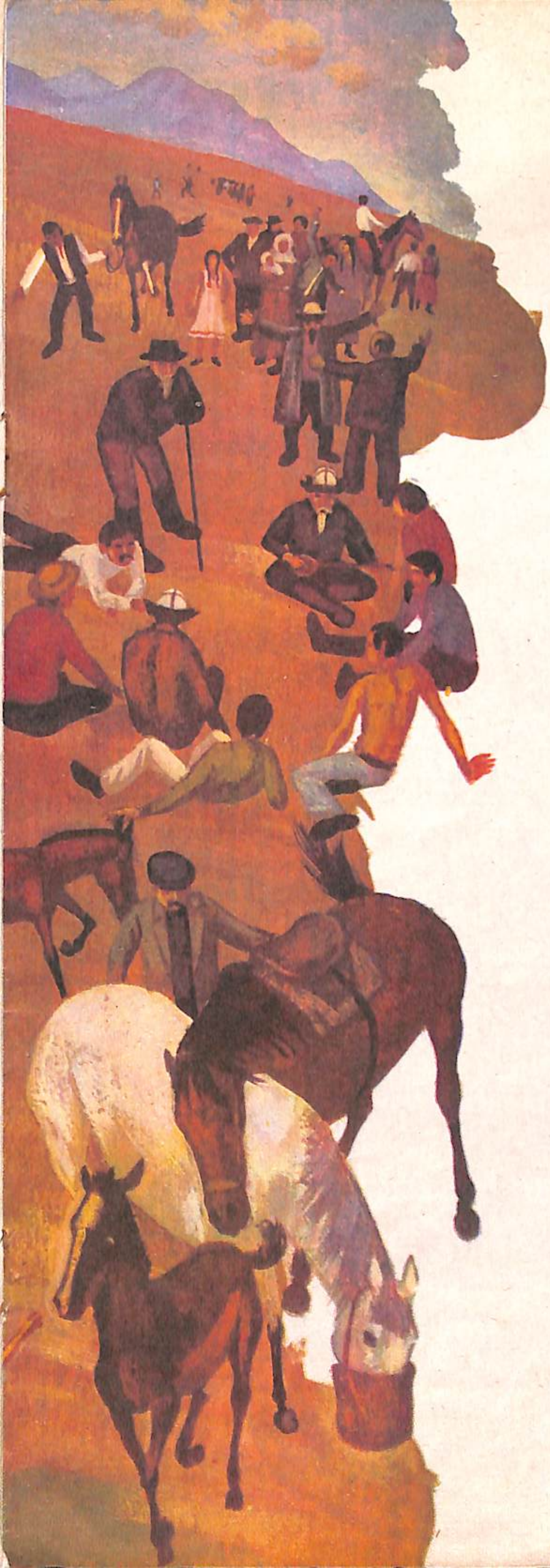
Towards evening I set off again and the two swallows, chirping joyfully, accompanied me a long way.

My horse went at an even trot. I thought about the old eagle, good old Granddad Beknur and the two flitting swallows which had built a nest in the lonely shepherd's yurta in the steppe.

There's nothing dearer to man than his homeland and countryside.







THE LITTLE JOCKEY

"Go!" sounded the sharp command.

Huddled in a ball, Dalabai fell forwards onto his horse's mane. Ten fiery racehorses at once tore away from the start in a mad gallop.

Kerkiik was an experienced racehorse and he knew that if his jockey crouched forwards and slackened the reins, he had to gallop at full speed.

The ground flashed past. The pounding hooves splintered the air. It was as if black sandstorms were racing across the brown patched steppe.

At first Dalabai couldn't see anything in the clouds of dust. He remembered the instructions his father, an old rider, had given him: "Watch out, if your horse swallows a lot of dust, he will quickly tire." Dalabai turned sharply to one side.

"Phhewwh! At last I've got away from it!"

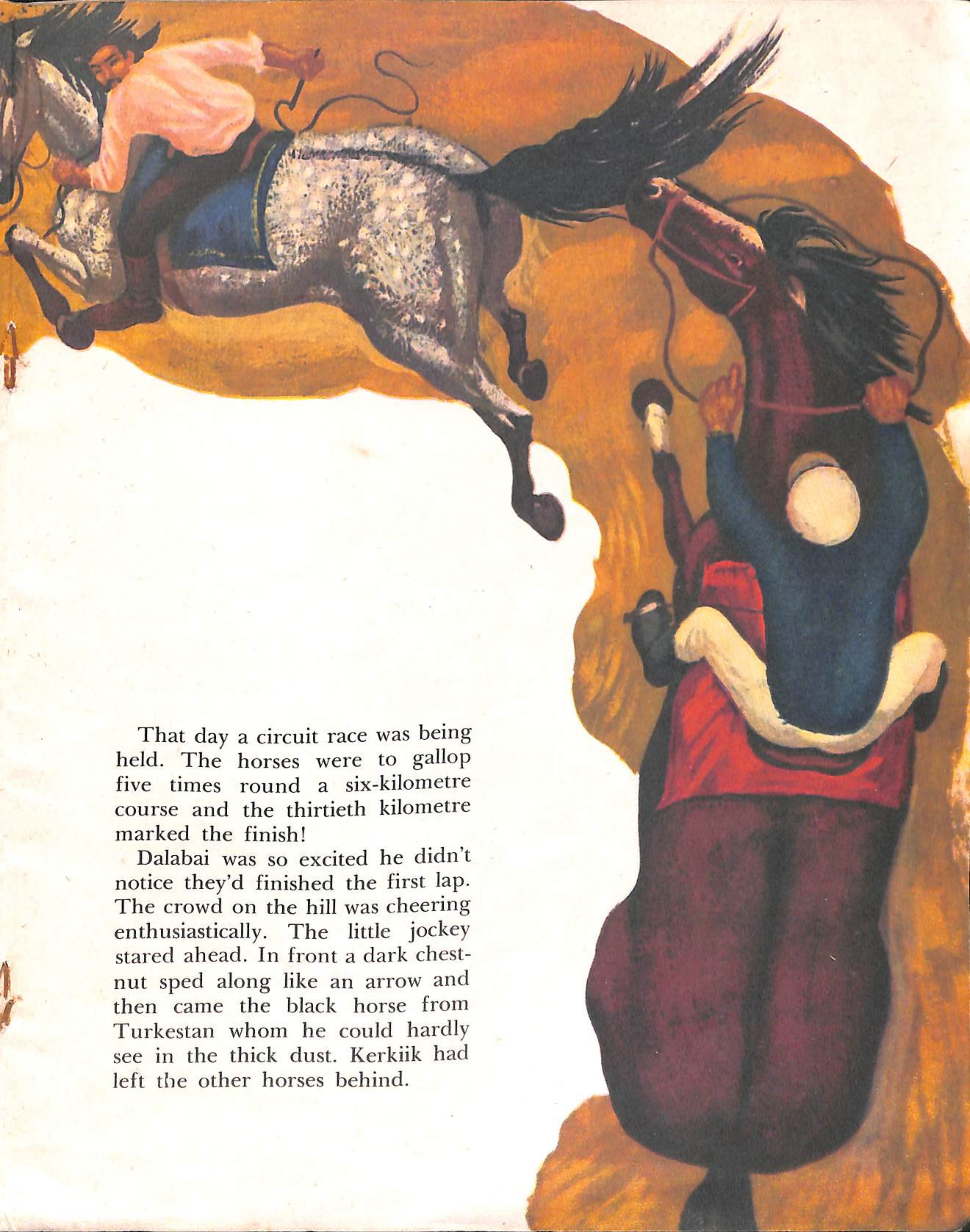


Just a minute ago the horses had been galloping in a tight bunch but now they had spread out like a flock of cranes with Kerkiik among them.

Dalabai had been racing horses since he was six. He was now ten and had got the hang of it. He understood horses and was a good rider. He was as light as a feather and as supple as rubber. That was why he had been entrusted to ride Kerkiik and defend the honour of the whole district of Karatau.

The little rider knew of two types of racing. The first was circuit racing. These races took place in the wide, open steppe around markers and the spectators could watch the contest from start to finish because the track was right before their eyes. The Kazakhs called these races "ainalma-baiga".

The other type of races was in a set direction. The horses started in the distant steppe and galloped towards a village. The spectators could then only see who came in first at the finish. And these races were called "aidama-baiga".



That day a circuit race was being held. The horses were to gallop five times round a six-kilometre course and the thirtieth kilometre marked the finish!

Dalabai was so excited he didn't notice they'd finished the first lap. The crowd on the hill was cheering enthusiastically. The little jockey stared ahead. In front a dark chestnut sped along like an arrow and then came the black horse from Turkestan whom he could hardly see in the thick dust. Kerkiik had left the other horses behind.

Dalabai tossed Kerkiik's thick mane over onto the other side. The horse liked it when the oncoming wind blew on his sweating neck. Then Dalabai slightly pulled on the reins. He had to check the excited horse in time and set him galloping at an even and steady pace. Otherwise, he'd quickly lose his wind and drop out of the race.

At the end of the second lap one of the racers caught Kerkiik up. The horses galloped neck and neck and their rumps touched but Kerkiik wouldn't let himself be overtaken. His whole body arched forwards and he flew like a bird over the steppe.

Dalabai remembered his father again. He was a great horse expert and racing trainer. Rearing a race horse involved a lot of fuss and bother. His father could tell at once what was wrong with a horse by feeling its girth. "Well," he would say to Dalabai, "you've tried too hard today. Look how heavily your horse is heaving. You mustn't gallop so wildly. If you do, you'll ruin your horse." Sometimes his father would say things he didn't understand at all. "Today your horse isn't sweating right. Tomorrow we'll make sure he does." Another time he noted anxiously: "When your horse has well and truly exercised his lungs, we'll let him have a rest." On the eve of races his father never stopped still. He would get up at midnight and give the hungry race horse a good barley mash. Then he would wash him down with cold water and rub him with a rough piece of linen cloth, comb out his mane and tail and fix his tackle.

In the morning his father said: "Your horse can't wait to start racing."

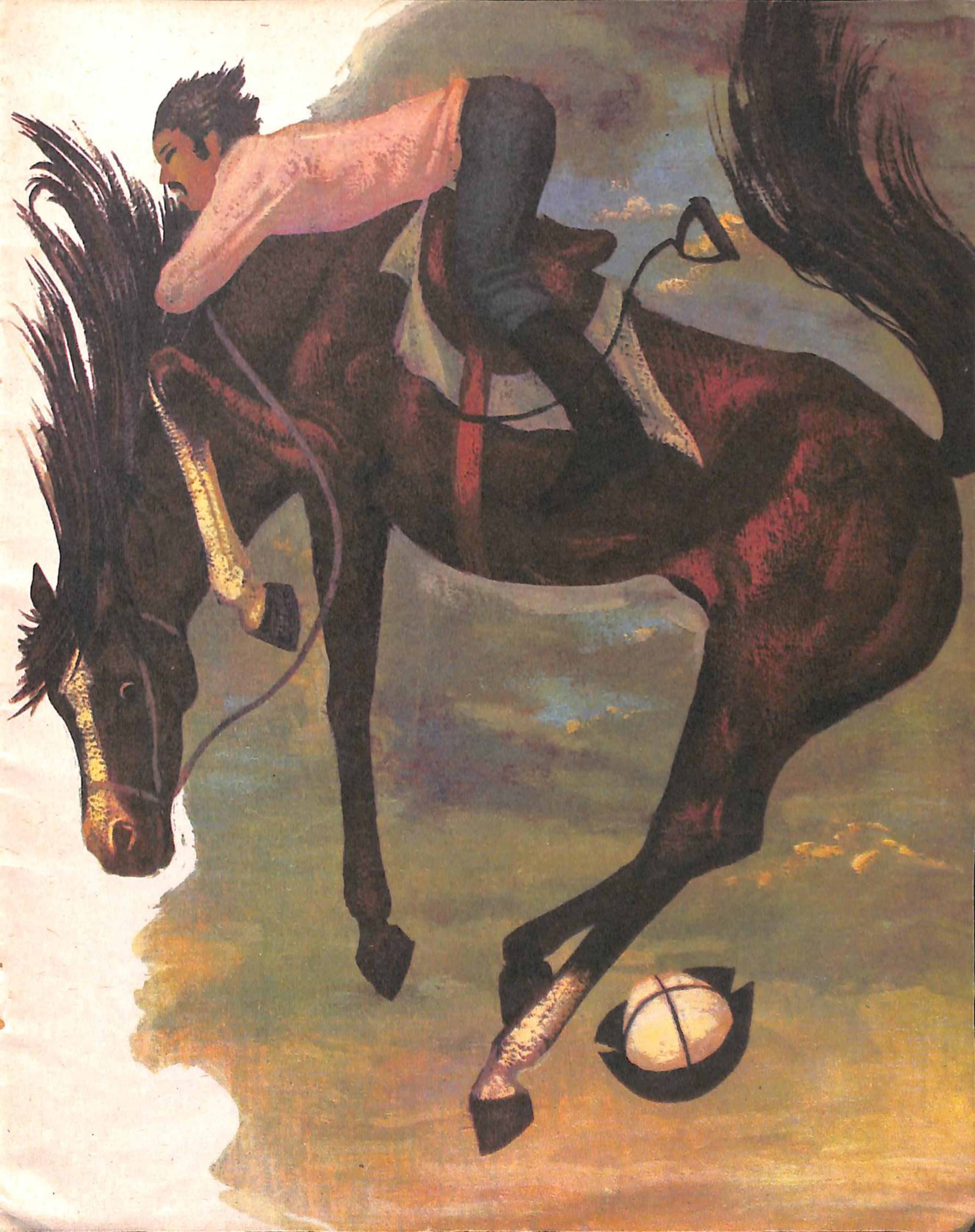
Dalabai was quick to understand. His father was generally a man of few words. "The horse won't let you down. Now everything's up to you"—this is what his father meant.

Dalabai got a handkerchief out from under his trouser belt, stretched forwards, holding tightly onto the mane, and wiped the horse's eyes. It was hard going for the horse when salty sweat got in his eyes. Sweat was also pouring down his sides and stinging and burning the rider's bare legs.

The third lap was coming to an end.

The little jockey hadn't as yet whipped Kerkiik at all.

The horse was galloping lightly and smoothly. The wind was whistling in the boy's ears and the horse's mane was streaming and flapping across his face. He was rapidly overtaking the dark chestnut



who was panting hard covered in lather and galloping heavily on his last legs. You could tell at once that the horse had been badly prepared for the race and hadn't rested in a stable for long enough. Dalabai remembered how Kerkiik had been the same when he first started racing.

The dark chestnut's rider, who was very young, beat him again and again with his crop. He didn't want to be overtaken and whipped the horse mercilessly. The horses were neck and neck. The dark chestnut was snorting and foaming at the mouth. Dalabai began to feel sorry for him and even felt a pang in his heart.

Then suddenly there was a crack as if something had snapped. Dalabai screwed up his eyes in fright. Surely his girth hadn't snapped? Galloping madly on for a moment, he bent down and looked. The girth was intact. As he lost ground, the dark chestnut had caught his stirrup. The girth had slackened and the saddle was slipping to and fro.

What should he do? There were still three laps to go. He couldn't pull up the horse as the rest would at once overtake him and leave him in the dust again, nor could he continue racing on a loose saddle. It wasn't comfortable for the horse and he himself would fly off at any moment. He had to tighten the girth at a full gallop. This required skill and agility.

Dalabai grabbed onto the reins with his teeth, carefully bent over, found the end of the wide girth, slackened it slightly, pulled sharply and then buckled the strap higher than the torn hole. The saddle was now firmly in place.

The little jockey felt relieved and happier but at this moment Kerkiik lost his pace and slowed down. Dalabai realised he was to blame because he shouldn't have ridden so closely to the dark chestnut.

But the race was at its highest pitch. The horses were galloping faster and faster. It was as if a storm was raging in the steppe. Other horses were catching up with Kerkiik. As before, the black horse from Turkestan was heading the field. He was now an arrow's flight away from the others. If he wasn't overtaken now, it would be too late....

Dalabai was even afraid to predict what would happen then. All his father's work and expectations and all Dalabai's efforts would have been in vain. How would he then look the others in the eye? And



Kerkiik wouldn't be given another chance either. A lump swelled in the little jockey's throat.

And then he whipped his horse for the first time. Cheering wildly, the crowd on the hill was again left behind.

The black horse raced on uncontrollably. It was a famous racer and called "Winged Spirit" by all the local villagers. His stocky, well-built rider was sitting proudly in the saddle. "Aren't you too heavy for the horse?" he was asked by the old men before the race. "Not at all!" the rider waved his hand. "Don't you know what staying-power he's got! And his spine's as tough as iron. I couldn't entrust such a racer to a puny lad." He was a self-confident fellow and without so much as glance at the other horses, chuckled behind his well-groomed, curly black moustache. You had to admit, the black horse really was good, fast and strong. He had led the way from the start.

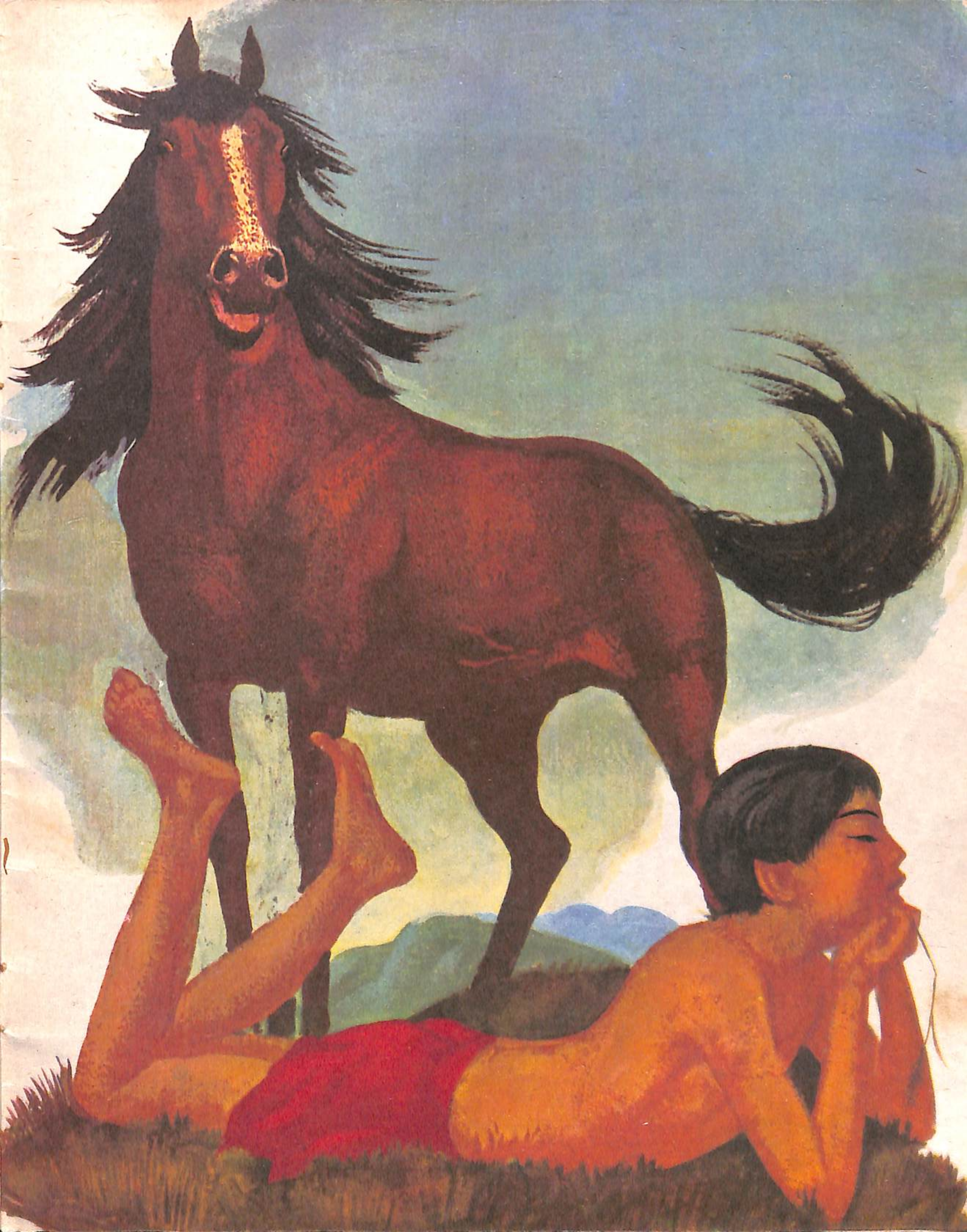
The whip blow urged Kerkiik on. A quiver ran across his body. The wind slapped Dalabai hard on the breast and he gasped for breath. He lowered his reins and between Kerkiik's ears saw how wildly the horse ahead was galloping. But the gap between them was narrowing. Dalabai could already hear the black horse's hooves pounding and the dust kicked up by him flew in his face.

"Giddy up, lovely! That's a boy!" the little jockey gently encouraged his horse.

Kerkiik came up level with the black horse whose lanky rider was sitting bolt upright in the saddle, his arms and legs dangling limply like a rag-doll's. He was, of course, too heavy for the race horse and should have paid heed to the old men. "In a long race even a whip is a burden on the horse," Dalabai's father would say. He also poked fun at the races at the town's racecourse. "They're just child's play. The horses are tiny and skinny and their riders are huge fat fellows who plunk about in the saddle like a sack of potatoes. The poor horses hardly manage to last one lap. They've only just started when they cross the finishing line. It's a bore to watch. The people are simply made fools of and the horses are put to shame." This lanky rider looked as if he was also used to riding at the town's racecourse. Steppe racing was quite different. Only the very best race horses were up to its long course and rapid pace.

But there's nothing finer to watch!

Whoosh! Kerkiik overtook the black horse!





The last and most difficult lap lay ahead.

The galloping horse's pounding hooves sounded like twanging music. What a beautiful race horse he was! Lunging forwards, he spread his legs out far and flew along like a joyful bird. Dalabai nearly slipped out of his saddle. His fingers clutched feverishly onto the horse's mane. He no longer urged him on with the whip. He was totally in the horse's control and the horse swept along at a frenzied gallop.

It was coming up to midday and the sun was scorching. Sandstorms were racing one another in the steppe. Screeching larks flew up in fright from under the horse's hooves.

The finish came into sight. People on horseback and on foot loomed black on the hill slopes and waited impatiently for the winner. The little jockey's heart began pounding joyfully and he wondered if his father could see him now. Where was he? The stable lads carrying white flags were hollowing wildly on their yearlings. They had to work the horses after the race because, you see, you couldn't stop an excited sweating horse at once. He had to be walked for quite some time until he cooled down and started breathing normally.







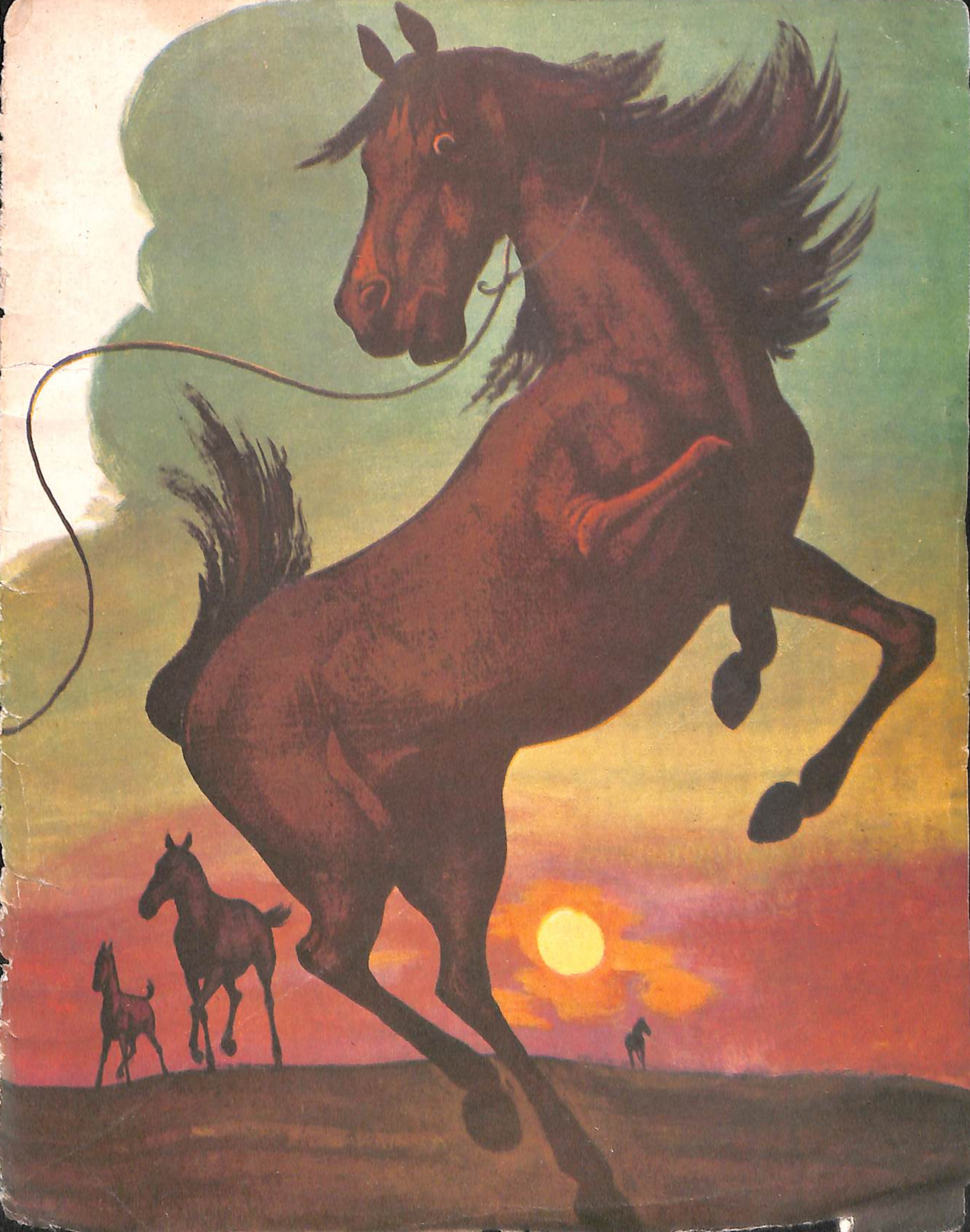
And there's the finishing post!

The steppe was humming and the crowd was swaying, shouting and cheering on the winner. Dalabai felt an upsurge of joy as if he was flying along on the winged magic horse extolled in their songs and folk tales. Kerkiik soared past the hill like a falling star.

Hurrah! He'd won first prize in the race! He had never felt so happy in his life before. A young stable lad gallopped alongside, took the reins from Dalabai and led Kerkiik. Dalabai lowered himself onto the grass. His legs had gone numb after the long race. Everything roundabout swayed and floated before his eyes.... The race horses sweeping over the steppe, his hands tensely gripping the reins and the twirling dust....

His father ran up, seized his son in his arms and tossed him into the air. He was excited and his voice trembled: "My dear lad!" he murmured affectionately. "You're a worthy son of your great forefathers!"







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